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Response to PATRICE PAVIS, "Staging Calamity? Mise en Scène and Performance at Avignon 2005"

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Yesterday's presentations and discussions returned again and again to variations on what I take to be the two leading imaginative paradigms of our current world/historical moment. Marshaled by the Bush administration, the threat of a vague and unspecific "terrorism" is used as "The Cold War" was 50 years ago for ideological manipulation of the public. On the left, a similarly vague anxiety is mounted about what Mike Davis in studying Los Angeles calls "The ecology of fear." The recent hurricane events and the Bush administration's inept preparation and response, their inadequate "performance," to use Tracy Davis's apt terms bring the two together

"The Imagination of Disaster", to use Susan Sontag's phrase in discussing the allegorical nature of many 1950s science fiction films where giant mutant insects or aliens stand in for anxieties about nuclear war, is with us again in new mass culture forms. We need only look at the new fall television season, populated by monsters in the deep, alien invasions, and other displaced threats in this era of "endless war" against "terrorism." And the flip side in the other stream of popular programs: mediums, profilers, diviners, and other forms of mystical and magical thinking, reminding us of Theodor Adorno's brilliant analysis of the Los Angeles Times horoscopes in the 1940s, *The Stars Come Down to Earth*. In the face of an ideological onslaught, we look to artists to get beyond the spin, hype, PR, and manipulation of public opinion.

In discussing the issue of calamity as presented at the Avignon festival in 2005, Patrice reminds us

If catastrophe [which he links to tragedy] is a punctual and irreversible phenomenon, calamity is a more lasting, or even permanent, state: a scourge affecting crops, an ecological disaster hitting a region, a misfortune or collapse affecting a people. Whether the catastrophe be a natural disaster or a man-made one, either way calamity brings about a long-lasting state of apathy for many artists.

And he makes the distinction

There are basically two solutions: **mise en scène** and **performance art**. Mise en scène requires dramatic fiction, representation; performance fulfils, presents a live, unrepeatable, real, and not fictive action.

He continues

. We have made a distinction between two kinds of (re)presentation, **mise en scène** and **performance art**: **mise en scène**, meaning theatre as it shaped by mise en scène since the end of the 19th Century, and **performance**, as is practiced since the 1960s. If none of the eight productions is performance in the strictest sense, all of them contain moments of performativity, where the present,

risk, uncertainty, or chance prevent the fictional representation of an event.

Here I want to make an aside to discuss how these terms are useful in a pedagogical problem I face at present. I'm teaching a course in the history and criticism of experimental video art, and an important part of early years, as many of you know, involves performance art. The first generation of video artists includes many performance artists who saw video as a way of recording their live work as well as media makers who used the easy intimacy of portable video to work with their bodies on screen. But I've found that many of my students, mostly Radio/Television/Film majors, despite the close relation our department has with Theatre, and Performance Studies, have difficulty viewing this work. In viewing the work of Bruce Nauman or Vito Acconci, for example, they are so used to looking at screen art with a *mise en scène* frame that they cannot read the representation of performance. They are blocking at the level of *mise en scène* and thus, already being experts at seeing the screen as vehicle for representation, find the performance unsatisfactory: boring, repetitive, hard to understand, and certainly hard to connect with. In other words, the dominant media environment and its conventions have conditioned the audience, even a media-savvy one, to read in a certain direction. Now, I think I can overcome that, and by the end of the course the students will be able to grasp the performance, but it is a challenge.

Patrice argues

The tragic catastrophe, which is sudden and punctual, has been supplanted by the endemic foreseeable and enduring calamity. Many productions, and almost as many spectators, seem afflicted with a deep and long-lasting depression, of a black vision of history.

And

. Because calamity, though it be immemorial, and link with all civilisations today feeds on the death of ideologies, on the absence of any political analysis that leads to action, the renouncement of critical thinking. Calamitous thinking, that end of history, of postmodern relativism, of the well-fed and right-thinking, displaces the natural plague onto social life, puts us in the axis of evil, threatens us with divine punishment.

These ideas might bring us to think about Non-Performance or Performance Anxiety, which also seems to be part of our current global situation. For us today, the Presidential gesture of apparently stunned silence following the announcement of the 9/11 attack, captured so well in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, was repeated through days of Texas vacationing following the Hurricane Katrina events. Military and environmental disasters seem to impinge on each other. Yet this very conjunction seems to have opened up a new possibility. We can ask, does calamity (the 2004 US Presidential election) lead to apathy? For some, and for a while, it did. But I think we also see an opening in that conjunction for comedy and critique. It was remarkable to watch the US news media finally recover its ability to actively and openly criticize official

sources. To see on the scene reporters telling studio news anchors that Washington reports were wrong, that the studio based people didn't really understand the situation on the ground, was a breakthrough. Let's hope it can last.

In the same vein, we can look at current comedy, particularly The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, for an attitude that is not just ironic but goes beyond despair. Like Patrice, I'll end by recalling Brecht, who argued from exile that the artist in a time of political crisis must advance the idea that change is not only necessary but also possible. We can think of Brecht's remark that Hitler would have been stopped in his rise to power if someone had just pulled his pants down during one of his oratorical bombasts. Or we can remember Chaplin's The Great Dictator as a wickedly funny comment on the ultimate leader. Or recall John Heartfield's graphic art deconstructing the pretensions of fascistic power.

As we know all too well, trauma can lead to paralysis and fear, and that fear can be mobilized by the right through powerful institutions. But comedy and critique can interrupt the affirmative voice of patriotism and present a second voice, speaking for the dispossessed, for the rational, for need for positive change. The official *mise en scène* needs the disruption of our own political performance.